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Women, Teaching, Authority, Silence: 1 Timothy 2:8–15 Explained by 1 Peter 3:1–6

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What did Paul mean when he wrote, “And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence” (1 Tim 2:12¹)?

If we look at the verse by itself it seems clear enough, though a hard teaching in a day when women serve as presidents of universities, corporations, and even countries.

Those of us who want to submit to God’s Word and let it judge us rather than we judging it have not found the text obscure. We’ve said, along with the Christian billboard advertising seen around the country, “What part of ‘Thou shalt not’ do you find confusing?”

But what are the implications? My wife teaches little children in church. Is she disobeying this verse? She is also a college professor with authority over many men. Is that appropriate?

When is teaching really teaching, and when is it not teaching? What is authority? Whole congregations and even denominations have split over these questions.

Precept Upon Precept

When we impose our human reasoning, traditions, or experience on the Bible, we are guilty of judging the Word by our own ideas.

If we want to understand the Bible, we need to let Scripture explain itself by comparing word with word, verse with verse. The result can be surprising at times, but it can also be wonderfully satisfying. This verse is an especially good example.

¹ All scriptural quotations are from the New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Richard Davidson, Chair of the Old Testament Department at the S.D.A. Theological Seminary at Andrews University, has recently pointed out that 1 Tim 2:8–15 and 1 Pet 3:1–6 are parallel passages. I knew there were similarities between the two, both of which deal in part with female adornment, but I'd never considered them side by side.

Davidson claims that because of the parallels, 1 Pet 3:1–6 sheds light on the meaning of Paul's apparent prohibition of women teaching or having authority.² I was skeptical, but because 1 Tim 2:12 has puzzled me for years, I decided to type out the two passages side by side and highlight the parallels. The results astonished me.

Look first at the best known part of each of these passages: 1 Tim 2:9–10 and 1 Pet 3:3–4. Both advise that women should dress modestly. Both suggest that the proper adornment for "women professing godliness" is not physical but behavioral. They have in common the words "adorn" ["adornment"], "hair," and "gold." Where Paul writes "costly clothing," Peter writes "fine apparel."³

Given these similarities, it seems almost certain that one of these men is restating the work of the other in this passage. But which came first? Scholars have long debated this.

If I had to guess, I would say Peter is restating Paul's ideas, for three reasons. First, Peter is familiar with Paul's work and says Paul has written "some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16).

Second, Paul's passage is "hard to understand" in several places, while Peter's is clear. Third, Peter's passage is more detailed than Paul's. Writers are more likely to add information that makes something clearer than to rewrite a passage to make it more confusing. As Peter and Paul are known to have met on occasion, it's easy to imagine Peter saying, "Brother Paul, what did you mean by this?"⁴

² "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews UP, 1998), 279–80, 293 (n. 102).

³ The Greek is somewhat different, but likewise synonymous.

⁴ It is also relevant that the subject matter of nineteen of the twenty-five verses in Jude is also found in 2 Peter, either using the same words or paraphrasing them. In these verses—297 words in Peter and 256 words in Jude—78 words are found in both. [See D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 437–438.] This lends support to the idea that Peter is paraphrasing Paul in 1 Pet 3:1–6, rather than Paul borrowing from Peter. It seems to have been common practice with him. Compare, for example, 2 Cor 5:21, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him," with 1 Pet 2:24, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness." Again Peter is clarifying Paul. For another example, compare 1 Pet 2:1 with Eph 4:3. Paul writes, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and *evil speaking* be put away from you, with *all malice*." Peter writes, "Therefore, laying aside *all malice*, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all *evil speaking*, . . ." 2 Cor 12:20 is also very similar. What Peter writes is either the same words or synonyms, but more concise and clearer. Also, a growing num-

CHRISTIAN: WOMEN, TEACHING, AUTHORITY, SILENCE

1 Timothy 2:8–15	1 Peter 3:1–6
<p>8 I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting;</p> <p>9 In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing,</p> <p>10 but, which is proper for women professing godliness, WITH GOOD WORKS.</p> <p>11 Let a woman LEARN IN SILENCE with all <i>submission</i>.</p> <p>12 And I do NOT permit a woman TO TEACH OR TO HAVE AUTHORITY over a <u>man</u>, but to BE IN SILENCE.</p> <p>13 For <u>Adam</u> was formed first, then Eve.</p> <p>14 And <u>Adam</u> was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.</p> <p>15 Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they CONTINUE IN FAITH, LOVE, AND HOLINESS, WITH SELF-CONTROL.</p>	<p>1 Wives, likewise, be <i>submissive</i> to your own <u>husbands</u>, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives,</p> <p>2 when they observe your CHASTE CONDUCT ACCOMPANIED BY FEAR.</p> <p>3 Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—</p> <p>4 rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, WITH THE INCORRUPTIBLE BEAUTY OF A GENTLE AND QUIET SPIRIT, WHICH IS VERY PRECIOUS IN THE SIGHT OF GOD.</p> <p>5 For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being <i>submissive</i> to their own <u>husbands</u>,</p> <p>6 as <u>Sarah</u> OBEYED <u>Abraham</u>, CALLING HIM LORD, whose daughters you are if you DO GOOD and are not afraid with any terror.</p>

More Parallels

Let's look at some of the other parallels. The passage by Peter refers twice to "wives," once to "women" who have "husbands," and once to "Sarah," the wife of a patriarch.

Paul's passage refers twice to "women," three times to "woman"—one of whom is "childbearing," and thus a wife—and once to Eve, the wife of a patriarch.

ber of scholars are accepting the "Matthean Priority" theory, that Mark was not the first gospel written, but that Mark wrote down Peter's stories about Jesus, and Peter had a copy of Matthew's gospel to spark his memory. This negates the need for a "Q Source" and is in line with Peter's other literary borrowing. (See David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Are “women” and “wives” parallel? In fact they are! “Woman” and “wife” are the very same word in Greek: *gynē*. The correct translation depends on the context.

1 Timothy 2:8–15	1 Peter 3:1–6
“adorn”	“adornment”
“hair” [lit. “plaiting”], “gold,” “costly clothing” “with good works”	“hair” [lit. “plaiting of hair”], “gold,” “fine apparel,” “with incorruptible beauty”
“woman” [<i>gynaiki</i> , v. 12], “women” [<i>gynaikas</i> , v. 9] “Eve,” “childbearing” [<i>technogonias</i> , childbirth]	“wives” [<i>gynaikes</i>], “women” [<i>gynaikes</i>], “Sarah”
“submission” [<i>hypotagē</i>]	“submissive” [<i>hypotassomenai</i>]
“man” [<i>andros</i> , a form of <i>aner</i> , a man or husband], “Adam”	“Husbands” [<i>andrasin</i>], “Abraham”
“learn in silence,” “be in silence” [<i>hesychia</i>],	“a gentle and quiet spirit” [<i>hesychiou</i>], “without a word”
“not . . . to teach or to have authority,” “with good works,” “continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control”	“chaste conduct accompanied by fear,” “obeyed,” “calling him lord,” “do good,” “with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit”

Why then do we find “women” in 1 Timothy and “wives” in 1 Peter? Because Paul’s passage was “hard to understand,” which for centuries has led translators to accidentally “twist” the meaning. Failing to notice the parallel between the two passages, they decided Paul was writing about women in the formal worship service. The NIV even prefaces the passage with the heading “Instructions on Worship,” even though there is nothing in it that clearly points to congregational worship.⁵ In truth, the parallels between the words of Paul and Peter suggest that Peter—under inspiration—understood Paul to be writing about wives in the home.

Likewise, Paul’s passage has the word “man” and Peter’s “husbands,” but the words used here for “man” and “husband” have the same root in Greek.

Both passages call for women to be submissive. The Bible clearly calls for women to be submissive to their husbands, for the woman to submit to the man (1 Cor 11:3). However, it does not call for women to be submissive to other men merely because of gender difference, other than the submission all who are part of the Body of Christ—whether male or female—owe to each other (1 Pet 5:5; see also Eph 5:21).

⁵ The call for the believers to pray for those in authority [vs. 1–2] need not mean in the church. Men are told to lift up “holy hands” not in the worship service, but “everywhere,” literally “in every place” (v. 8). Paul is explaining forms of quiet missionary activity through public prayer, not prescribing acceptable forms for congregational worship. The lifting up of hands was a common practice in Jewish prayers, even on the street.

CHRISTIAN: WOMEN, TEACHING, AUTHORITY, SILENCE

Thus, Paul's call for "submission" is another reason to believe he was writing about "wives" rather than "women" in the church.

Teaching, Authority, and Silence

What does Peter tell us about what Paul means when he writes, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence"? When we understand Peter's argument, Paul's will become clear. Fortunately, Peter's argument is not difficult.

In 1 Pet 2:13–3:6 Peter calls in turn for everyone to submit to the government, for servants to submit to their masters, for wives to submit to their husbands, and for husbands to give honor to their wives. Later, in 5:5, he tells younger people to submit their elders, asks all church members to submit to each other, then in v. 6 tells everyone to humble themselves before God. What parts of the book are not about submission are about suffering.

We are to submit to the government "to silence the ignorance of foolish men" (2:15). Slaves are to submit to masters because "enduring grief" is "commendable" (2:19), it will lead masters to praise them rather than curse them. Wives, by submitting, may win unbelieving husbands to Christ (3:1–2).⁶ Thus, this submission is part of God's strategy for expanding His kingdom and minimizing resistance to it.⁷

Now we are ready to look at the parallels that help us understand what Paul is saying about teaching and authority.⁸

Paul writes that a woman must "learn in silence" and "be in silence." Does this mean wives must never speak? Many English translations suggest it does. Peter explains Paul's meaning, however, when he writes that wives, "without a word," with "a gentle and quiet spirit," may win their husbands to Christ. In Greek, Paul's "silence" is *hesychias* and Peter's "quiet spirit" is *hesychiou pneumatos*.⁹

Peter uses a pun in v. 1 when he says that husbands who do not "obey the word" may be won "without a word." A wife doesn't have to quote Scripture to her husband on all occasions to win him to Christ. There are better ways.

C. Raymond Holmes concurs with this understanding of "silence" when he writes, "Paul does not mean to enforce absolute silence on these women learners. This is apparent by his choice, under inspiration, of the Greek term *en hesy-*

⁶ Paul makes a similar argument in 1 Cor 7:14 when he says that unbelieving spouses can be "sanctified" by their believing husbands or wives. ("Sanctified" here is not a theological term, but means "made holy" or, more clearly, "brought to holiness.") However, in this case it is not only women but men who by their own holiness can bring their spouses to believe.

⁷ In 2:12 Peter calls all believers to live good lives so the pagans will glorify God when He returns.

⁸ Note in passing that Paul's call for believers to pray for those in power (1 Tim 2:1–2) is parallel to Peter's call for submission to rulers and masters in 1 Pet 2:13–21.

⁹ In 1 Cor 14:34–35, which is clearly dealing with proper decorum in a wildly disordered worship service, Paul commands women to be silent [*sigatosan*] and not talk [*lalein*]. We don't know the exact circumstances, but *lalein* refers to talking in general, not to teaching, preaching, praying, or prophesying. Teaching and authority are not the issue here, but wives disrupting worship by talking to their husbands (see v. 35).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

chia, which means ‘peaceable and nonargumentative,’ implying respectful listening. Another Greek word was available, *sige*, had he wished to indicate total silence. The ‘quiet lives’ of 1 Timothy 2:2 and the ‘quiet spirit’ of 1 Peter 3:4 are certainly more realistic understandings than absolute silence.”¹⁰

This brings us at last to Paul’s not permitting a woman “to teach or to have authority.” Peter explains this when he calls for “chaste conduct accompanied by fear” and reminds wives that “Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord.”

If Jesus is our Lord, we accept that we have no authority over Him. As Job discovered, we are not in a position to teach God (see Job 38–41). The parallels reveal that both Paul and Peter are calling women to a quiet service which will draw their husbands to salvation. As Proverbs 15:1 says, “A soft answer turns away wrath.”

Actually, Peter reveals that we “twist” Paul’s words when we concentrate on his not permitting women “to teach or to have authority.” We should also include, in Paul’s admonition, his call for women to reveal their godly characters by their “good works” and “continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control.” These, along with “propriety and moderation” in adornment, make up a complex of characteristics found in “women professing godliness.”

Thus, by his apparent rephrasing of Paul’s rather awkward statements, so “hard to understand,” Peter reveals the beautiful truth at the heart of Paul’s passage. Christ-like wives can transform their homes and families without preaching at their husbands. They don’t need to tell them what they’re doing wrong or tell them what they have to do “or else!”

We discover Paul is not talking about the worship service or church governance in this passage, but only about how wives can create a Christian home.

We find that 1 Timothy 2:11–15 does not preclude godly women from teaching, preaching, evangelizing with authority, but only calls for them to be submissive to their husbands.

“Rightly dividing the word of truth” does not depend on accepting the misogynistic traditions of ancient Greek culture or the faulty reasoning of the medieval church. It does not depend on forcing the Word to fit our cultural norms. By comparing verse with verse, passage with passage, we find that God’s Word interprets itself.

Post-Publication Note: Interested readers should also see Gordon P. Hugenberger’s “Women In Church Office: Hermeneutics or Exegesis?: A Survey of Approaches to 1 Tim 2:8–15,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 35/3 (September 1992): 341–360. This is the article cited by Richard Davidson in his own article, mentioned above, which led in turn to my study. Unfortunately, the issue of *JETS* containing Hugenberger’s article was not on the shelf in the seminary library where I researched this piece. Hugenberger’s article is complementary to this one, but includes much valuable information this one lacks.

¹⁰ “Does Paul Really Forbid Women to Speak in Church? A Closer Look at 1 Timothy 2:11–15,” in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000), 167. However, my friend Dr. Holmes believes the passage is talking about the worship service, not the husband and wife in the home.